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ABSTRACT

In the nearly 5 years since the passage of the Family Support Act, a body of research related to the convergence of welfare reform and adult basic and literacy education has begun to emerge. Much of it deals directly with the experience of providing adult basic and literacy education to Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) Program participants. Analysis of employment and training program evaluation research suggests that basic education and literacy services remain an important component of welfare reform, but they need to be fundamentally redesigned. Two studies of participants in Steps to Success, Oregon's largest JOBS program, are more encouraging. One study indicates that participants in the Career and Life Planning (CLP) Track experience positive changes in their concepts of self, skills, and sense of choice and personal control regarding progress toward self-sufficiency. Data from the other study show that clients from the CLP track raised their literacy skills substantially; the gains represented sustained learning gains and appeared to be significantly associated with reductions in future dependence on public assistance. Suggestions for developing effective programs include the following: customizing programs and services for JOBS clients; creating holistic, integrated curricula; developing collaborative relationships with other agencies; and developing more comprehensive participant outcomes. (YLB)

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Welfare to Work:
The Role of Adult Basic and Literacy Education
Practice Application Brief

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Susan Imel
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PRACTICE APPLICATION BRIEF

WELFARE TO WORK: THE ROLE OF ADULT BASIC AND LITERACY EDUCATION

With the passage of the 1988 Family Support Act (FSA), adult basic and literacy education was linked to welfare reform. Based on experimentation with welfare reform during the previous decade, the FSA created the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program (JOBS). JOBS, which requires states to make educational services available to welfare recipients, was created in response to the general consensus that welfare recipients are not well prepared to enter the work force (Cohen et al. 1994). One of its major underlying assumptions is "that a strong foundation of literacy and basic skills is critical to the successful transition to employment and self-sufficiency for AFDC parents—especially young parents" (National Institute for Literacy 1994, p. 2).

The educational and skill levels of welfare recipients as a group are lower than that of the general adult population. For example, compared to 27 percent of the general adult population, nearly 50 percent of welfare recipients do not have a high school diploma (NIFL 1994). Also, 30 percent of welfare recipients have basic skills below those of the minimum skill level of all women in the lowest occupational skill areas (Cohen et al. 1994). Thus, to the architects of the FSA, a logical avenue for assisting welfare recipients in achieving economic self-sufficiency was to provide those who needed it adult basic and literacy education services through JOBS. The need for this assistance has subsequently been supported: an estimated two-thirds of JOBS enrollees require basic skills enhancement before they are able to enter the work force (ibid.). The other third are placed in employment more immediately, either in the private sector or community service work (Chisman and Woodworth 1992).

In the nearly 5 years since the passage of the FSA, a body of research related to the convergence of welfare reform and adult basic and literacy education has begun to emerge. Some of this research is based on experiments with welfare-to-work programs leading up to the FSA (e.g., California's Greater Avenues for Independence [GAIN] program), but much of it deals directly with the experiences of providing adult basic and literacy education to JOBS participants. This ***Practice Application Brief*** reviews some of these research findings and describes their implications for practice.

What Does the Research Say?

Evaluation studies of employment and training programs, including the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA), and JOBS, are one body of research that can inform practice. This research has been conducted over the past 20 years primarily on demonstration programs designed to improve the basic skills and employability of disadvantaged adults. A synthesis (Cohen et al. 1994) of this research resulted in the following conclusions that have a bearing on the role of adult basic and literacy education in welfare-to-work programs:

- Because they use traditional pedagogical approaches for which many adults have little tolerance, adult basic and literacy education programs have experienced difficulty attracting and retaining participants. Furthermore, many low-skilled adults see no connection between this traditional approach and their primary goal of getting a job.
- Achieving substantial and long-lasting gains in measured basic skills through traditional adult education programs is difficult. "The research on these initiatives presents a disappointing message in terms of the effectiveness of literacy, job training, and education programs in remedying and/or compensating for the basic skills deficiencies of many young adults" (ibid., p. 34).
- Currently, little evidence exists connecting participation in one of these programs with noticeable headway toward economic self-sufficiency among welfare participants.
- When programs are tailored to the needs of participants, results are more encouraging. For example, participants in programs that linked basic skills instruction to occupational training or to other work experience are more highly motivated to complete the program; furthermore, they "do achieve sizable gains in employment and earnings in future years" (ibid.).

Cohen et al. (1994) concluded their analysis of the employment and training program evaluation research by suggesting that, although "the studies demonstrate that basic education and literacy services remain a very important component of welfare reform, . . . they clearly need to be fundamentally redesigned" (p. 34) because "traditional literacy training and employment approaches have not been found to be effective with welfare recipients" (p. 39).

Findings from studies devoted solely to the JOBS program support this conclusion. For example, based on a national study of the basic skills component of the JOBS program, Chisman and Woodward (1992) concluded that, "to achieve its mission, JOBS basic education must have a far different set of goals than standard adult education courses have" (p. 54). In their study of JOBS programs in five states, Pauly, Long, and Martinson (1992) found that, although educational institutions are often willing to serve JOBS clients, they are sometimes reluctant to alter their existing programs, primarily because they do not wish to disrupt established practices. Pauly, Long, and Martinson also discovered that "little attention is being given to determining the quality of education provided under JOBS" (p. 9), which they attributed to lack of coordination and collaboration between human service staff and education officials. Currently, participation rates are the primary benchmark for JOBS programs.

Welfare Reform: Putting a Human Face on It

Fortunately, not all findings from research on the adult literacy and basic skills component of JOBS are as disheartening as those reported here. Two studies (Reder and Wikelund 1994; Wikelund 1993) of participants in Steps to Success, Oregon's largest JOBS program, are more encouraging. Administered by Mt. Hood Community College, Steps has two service tracks: the Placement Track for those clients who

have marketable skills and the Career and Life Planning (CLP) Track, for those clients who need to enhance their basic literacy and/or vocational skills.

As a means of understanding how those adults who have not traditionally participated in adult basic and literacy education view their own literacy development, Wikelund (1993) conducted a qualitative study in which 27 CLP clients participated. She found that, as a result of the CLP program, participants were experiencing positive changes in their concepts of self, skills, and sense of choice and personal control regarding progress toward self-sufficiency. Because the program worked on developing and changing how participants perceived themselves and their opportunities for developing their skills and becoming self-sufficient economically, Wikelund concluded that the CLP was unknowingly focusing on something she labeled the concept of *perceived opportunity structure*. Defined as "an individual's expectations about what kinds of situations will arise and what their outcomes will be" (ibid., p. 33), Wikelund believes that perceived opportunity structure is essential to understanding participation and motivation. Beyond helping participants develop specific skills, the CLP also helped them eliminate internal feelings of inadequacy and prepared them to make further changes.

Reder and Wikelund (1994) also used CLP clients to investigate long-term literacy development and its economic impact. Participants in the study took a basic skills test and completed a questionnaire about their activities since completing the CLP 1-3 years previously. Data on participants' employment, earnings, and welfare dependence since the programs were also acquired and used in analysis, as were qualitative data from program staff and participants in Wikelund's (1993) earlier study. The study resulted in the following findings:

- Based on the results of differences between pretest scores at program entry and posttests administered 1-3 years later, clients in the CLP track raised their literacy skills substantially. Not only were these gains larger than those normally reported by adult education programs, but they also represented sustained learning gains that persisted years after program exit.
- Clients' assessed literacy gains appeared to be significantly associated with reductions in future dependence on public assistance.
- Three principal factors underlying clients' experiences of the CLP program and its impact on their long-term literacy development and economic outcomes were identified: Employment, Personal Growth, and Educational Development. According to the researchers, "clients tend to view improvements in their basic skills as an inseparable component of their overall personal growth rather than as the development of a free-standing set of skills" (ibid., n.p.).

Implications for Practice

How can the results of the research on the JOBS basic skills component be used to improve practice? Suggestions for developing effective programs include the following:

- **Customize programs and services for JOBS clients.** Programs and services that address their goals are more likely to engage and motivate welfare recipients. Some examples include early staff intervention to identify reasons for absences and one-stop, single-site programs that provide multiple services (e.g., education, child care, job-search assistance) (Pauly and Martinson 1993).
- **Create holistic, integrated curricula that blend basic skills development with occupational preparation and personal growth.** Although some programs have begun to create curricula that simultaneously develop work habits and basic skills, the Oregon program results (Reder and Wikelund 1994; Wikelund 1993) indicate that personal growth is also a necessary component. It is this component that seemed to have a positive effect on participants' perceived opportunity structure, thus contributing to their retention in the program and subsequent self-sufficiency.
- **Develop collaborative relationships with other agencies.** Customizing programs and creating holistic curricula cannot take place in a vacuum but rather demand collaborative efforts from all agencies concerned with providing client services. Those geographic areas that have developed strong collaborative relationships among education, human/social services, and employment and training agencies have been more successful in providing services to welfare recipients (NIFL 1994).
- **Develop more comprehensive participant outcomes.** If meaningful progress is to be made, the JOBS program needs to work with state-level adult education personnel to develop more comprehensive and compatible goals, objectives, and participant outcomes, beyond simple participation rates.

For adult basic and literacy educators, one message comes through loud and clear from the research: serving welfare recipients cannot be business as usual. Effective programs demand a different approach, one that is tailored to the specific needs of the clients. However, adult educators should not expect that they will develop these approaches on their own or without additional resources. Interagency collaboration will be a key component of their success. Those adult education programs that have success in serving JOBS clients will undoubtedly learn something that can be used in providing services to all their learners.

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